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Bob McCaslin

Washington State Senator • 4th Legislative District

2005 Legislative Report

Dear neighbors,

The Legislative session in Olympia this year saw the passage of many bills that will affect your everyday life. As the minority party in the Senate, we aimed to shield Washington's citizens from huge tax increases and unchecked spending by the other side of the aisle.

We had some successes in this regard. But in the end, taxes are going to go up, if you smoke, buy liquor, or fill your car with gas.

Inside this newsletter, I hope to provide you with some information and thoughts about the big issues we faced in 2005. Most of these issues you've likely read about over the past few months, and are now being signed into law.

And as always, please send me your comments and thoughts. The Legislature will not convene again until next January, but we're always looking for ideas and ways to make the lives of Washington's citizens even better.

It continues to be an honor to serve the citizens of the 4th District.

Sincerely,

Sen. Bob McCaslin

2005-07 budget balanced with \$400 million in new taxes

Every two years, the Legislature is charged with writing a two-year operating budget for the state. This budget pays for everything from state health care services, to K-12 and higher education, to state parks and the Fish and Wildlife Department.

This year, we were again faced with a bit of a budget shortfall, as our economy continues its steady climb from the recession of a few years back. This was a good news/bad news scenario. The good news was, revenues were on the rise, meaning we had more resources to cover our state's basic needs.

The bad news was, the majority party came into the session with a long wish list of spending items. A large state employee collective bargaining deal also loomed as a significant price tag. Coupled with health care costs that are continuing to rise, budget writers were faced with a bit of a challenge to fund everything. But it's something we felt could be achieved without raising taxes.

continued

Budget – *continued from front*

In early April, Senate Republicans offered a no-new-taxes spending plan for the next two years that:

- provides for 10,000 new college enrollments (only 7,900 are funded in the final budget);
- fully funds voter-approved education initiatives I-728 and I-732;
- fully funds levy equalization for property poor school districts (final budget amount is reduced by \$12.9 million);
- provides a much-needed rate increase for doctors willing to care for Medicaid patients;
- makes the first payment toward eliminating the unfunded liability in the teachers' and state employees' pension systems (final budget skips payment in 2005-07 biennium pushing the problem into future bienniums and risking a lawsuit);
- eliminates day fees at state parks so more families could afford to use these taxpayer provided facilities (final budget continues day use fees);
- funds the new collective bargain agreement with state employees; and
- leaves a healthy balance in the ending fund reserve (the final budget spends down the ending

fund reserve so that one bad revenue forecast could wipe it out).

Unfortunately, our cost savings ideas were largely ignored. It seemed that the budget writers this session came to Olympia with an assumption that we would need to raise taxes to fix the problem, so they went ahead and did so. I felt this could have been avoided if we had taken the time to truly examine some of the cost-drivers in state government.

The final budget approved by the Legislature included \$400 million in new taxes. The final budget:

- revives the state's death tax (\$138 million);
- adds the sales tax to extended warranties (\$37 million);
- ups the tax on cigarettes by 60 cents per pack (\$174 million); and
- increases the tax on liquor by \$1.33 per liter (\$50 million).

There were plenty of good things in the final version of the budget, like funding for K-12 and higher education, but I didn't think we needed to harm our business climate by raising taxes to pay for everything.

Get ready to pay more at the gas pump (Senate Bill 6103)

Gas prices are at a record high. Prices seem to rise every time we stop at the pump. Our transportation system still needs improvement though, and paying for it is a difficult task. In the end, the Legislature voted to pass a transportation package that will raise the gas tax, among other fees, to pay for different projects across the state.

I felt that the final transportation package was too expensive and too Seattle-centric, therefore I did not support it. Construction improvements to roads in the 4th District were included, but too much of the revenue goes to Seattle first.

The final transportation revenue package contains the following provisions:

- A 9.5-cent increase in the state gas tax over four years (3 cents in 2005; 3 cents in 2006; 2 cents in 2007; and 1.5 cents in 2008)
- A new weight fee on vehicles (for example, the owner of a Ford Taurus would pay \$10 a year; the owner of a Ford Expedition would pay \$20 a year)
- An increase in various fees related to transportation (for example the fee for an original driver's license application will increase from \$10 to \$20)

There was funding included for projects in Spokane. Barring a change to the new laws, Spokane County will see \$152 million for the North South Spokane Corridor. Funding was also provided to complete the lane expansion and safety upgrades to I-90 from the city center, through the Spokane Valley, to the state line.

Funding those needed projects will improve traffic flow in our region, and help ready us for future growth in Spokane County.

We were also successful in the Senate adding a provision fully funding independent performance audits of the state transportation system by the state auditor to identify ways to reduce transportation construction costs.



Election Reforms signed into law

Entering the 2005 session, the controversy of the close governor's race was certainly on everyone's mind. Given the problems evident in our election system — and especially in King County — it was clear that we needed to make some changes to the system.

If each voter cannot be certain that their vote is counted correctly, and counted only once, then we'll lose all voter faith in our election system.

In the end, while I don't feel that the reforms passed were strong enough — there's still no requirement that voters show photo ID at the polls and provide proof of citizenship when registering to vote — we did pass some reforms to begin addressing the problems with our election system.



Six bills have gone to the governor to be signed into law:

- **House Bill 1749** – This measure requires the Secretary of State's office to review county elections departments at least once every three years and stipulates that steps to be taken to correct problems must be submitted in writing.
- **Senate Bill 5395** – This measure requires a paper trail for all electronic voting machines.
- **Senate Bill 5564** – This measure requires a plain English easy-to-understand manual for election workers for every step in the process.
- **Senate Bill 5565** – This measure improves the voting process for military and overseas voters.
- **Senate Bill 5743** – This measure addresses issues raised by the federal Help American Vote Act (HAVA):
 - Identification other than photo ID is allowed at the polls. These alternatives include: a current utility bill, bank statement, or paycheck. Voters without any identification will be given a provisional ballot.
 - Proof of citizenship is not required to register to vote, but all state agencies that assist in voter registration must ask the applicant if he or she is at least 18 years old and if he or she is a U.S. citizen as required in the constitution.
 - Convicted felons must sign a statement acknowledging they have lost their right to vote and their voter registration will be canceled until their rights are restored.
- The Secretary of State shall compare the voter registration database with those maintained by the state Department of Health, the Washington State Patrol and the Office of the Administrator of the Courts to check for deaths and felony convictions.
- **Senate Bill 5499** – This measure is the omnibus election reform bill that contains the following provisions:
 - The Secretary of State shall develop guidelines for signature verification on ballot envelopes.
 - Provisional and absentee ballots must be printed on colored paper or imprinted with a bar code so that they appear different from regular polling-place ballots.
 - Ballots may not be enhanced. Damaged ballots may be duplicated so they can be counted electronically, but only if the voter's intent is clear. The original and duplicate ballot must be kept together and the process must be monitored by a team of two or more people.
 - Ballots returned by mail that are unsigned require the voter to appear in person to resolve the situation.
 - A security flap is added to absentee return envelopes to protect voter identity.
 - At the time of certification, each county auditor must prepare a report that reconciles the number of registered voters, with the number of regular, provisional and absentee ballots issued, counted and rejected. Every vote should have a voter.

As I mentioned, I do feel some important reforms were left out. Besides the lack of a requirement to show photo ID and proof of citizenship when registering to vote, there are still no random checks of voter registration rolls for dead people, felons or non-citizens. We failed to move the filing date for candidates to an earlier date to allow more time to get ballots out to military and overseas voters. And no provisions are included to allow military ballots to be counted if they are received late and therefore returned after Election Day.

I hope we'll be able to address some of those issues and changes next session.

Major step in the fight against meth labs approved

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive illegal drug that is easily produced in a make-shift lab — creating a highly volatile and dangerous situation. This especially has been a problem that Spokane County has dealt with over the past few years. HB 2266 requires that cold and allergy medicines containing ephedrine, pseudoephedrine or phenylpropanolamine must be kept behind counters. Persons purchasing such medicines must show photo ID for the clerk to verify he or she is at least 18 years of age. The State Board of Pharmacy will conduct a pilot project to determine the best way for sellers of the drugs to keep a log so that it is useful to law and can act as a deterrent to criminal activity. HB 2266 has been sent to the governor to be signed into law.

Unemployment Insurance reforms bad for business

House Bill 2255 repeals major unemployment reforms approved in 2003. This bill was bad news for small businesses and the economy, and I did not support it. If the majority party wants to drive more businesses to Idaho and Oregon, this is a great way to do it.

The measure makes an across-the-board 3.85 percent reduction in benefits for all year-round workers and uses that money and additional one-time federal funds to increase unemployment benefits for seasonal workers. Senate Republicans argued modifying the carefully crafted 2003 UI compromise would result in a less stable system, higher unemployment taxes and a less competitive business climate.

We offered a \$75/week stipend for seasonal workers out of federal dollars available until we could complete a study of the seasonality provisions and develop eco-

nomic models to determine the effect of changes on the stability of the system. This compromise was rejected by the majority party. The reforms, approved by a strong bipartisan vote in 2003, were intended to be the first step to help bring balance to our unemployment system to improve Washington's business climate and attract more jobs. Currently, Washington's per employee unemployment tax is one of the highest in the nation.

Tort Reform will go to the people

Health care costs have continued to explode upward throughout the last decade, with high insurance costs and expensive malpractice cases being one of the reasons why. Over the last few years, the Legislature has made an effort to reform our state tort system, to find a balance between keeping costs down for doctors, and protecting the rights of the patient.

- Little progress has been made, and now the two sides that are facing off over the issue — doctors and lawyers — are making attempts to change the system themselves. Both sides submitted initiatives to the Legislature this session, presenting their proposal to fix the system.
- In the end, the Legislature did not approve either of the initiatives, which means the two will now go to the people of Washington to vote on.
- The initiative proposed by the physicians would put a cap on lawsuit damages, aiming to limit skyrocketing jury awards in malpractice cases.
- The initiative proposed by the lawyers does not have a cap, but has tougher penalties on bad doctors, and aims to strengthen patient rights.

You will hear much more about this complex issue over the next few months. I encourage you to learn about the issue so you can decide what you think is the best solution to support.

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